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SUBJECT: REQUEST TO DOUBLE AMERICAN CORNERS IN TAJIKISTAN

¶1. This is an action request. See para six below.

¶2. The Ambassador's February 7 visit to the American Corner in Khujand, where he met with FLEX alumni and was warmly welcomed by provincial and city education officials, reaffirms the enormous value of American Corners in Tajikistan - and the government's receptive attitude toward them.

¶3. Public diplomacy is the sine qua non for advancing U.S. interests in the pivotal country of Tajikistan, a front-line state in the Secretary's initiative to rebuild historic links between Central and South Asia and to effect transformational diplomacy in challenging parts of the world.

¶4. We suggest five reasons to double the number of American Corners in Tajikistan:

-- BOOST TO U.S. POLICY: These small centers aggressively support key regional policy priorities: promoting democratic processes and mutual understanding. The Ambassador led a February 7 roundtable discussion with 20 students at the American Corner at the Central Library in Khujand, where students asked pressing and pointed questions about free speech, the current cartoon controversy, and racism in the United States. Participants demonstrated a strong knowledge and curiosity about different ways of approaching religion, ethnic differences and democracy. These open and enquiring students are the next generation of Tajikistan's leaders.

-- REASONABLE COST: American Corners are enormously cost-effective. An American Corner costs approximately \$50,000 to set up and \$10,000 per year to run. In return, thousands of Tajik students and citizens get access to books, DVDs, movies, news and, perhaps most important, Internet. They also provide a read-made venue for American-citizen programming. Our message is made available in an open environment where it is, so far, warmly welcome and widely appreciated.

-- IMPROVED ACCESS: Most Tajiks cannot yet afford private access to the Internet or satellite television. American Corners provide Tajiks the chance to see something other than the largely anti-U.S. Russian media. Even the posters on the walls in the Khujand American Corner reinforced messages of democracy, free trade, tolerance, and diversity that are the cornerstones of U.S. values and the central message of our public diplomacy. Access is a two-way street -- our access to every-day Tajiks also grows. At the Ambassador's recent program at the Khujand American Corner, the Public Affairs Section got 20 new requests to be included on Embassy press release mailings.

-- HIGH VISIBILITY FOR THE UNITED STATES: American Corners provide an attractive physical space and forum for discussion that does not exist elsewhere in Tajikistan. They are a safe place to explore ideas and topics that are not always popular with the old schools of thought. Students told the Ambassador

how much they appreciated the facility. It demonstrates the best of American intentions at a time when our relationship with the Muslim world is frequently misunderstood.

-- AMERICAN CORNERS WORK: The volume and enthusiasm of visitors speaks to their effectiveness. While traveling, EmbOffs frequently are asked to bring American Corners to various small cities and universities. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, the fact the UK Embassy just opened a "British room" at a local educational institute demonstrates how effective a tool the American Corners have been.

¶15. Within the current \$2.7 trillion budget proposal, the several hundred thousand dollars - a proverbial drop in the bucket - it would cost to double the number of American Corners in a receptive Tajikistan would be a minuscule investment with potentially huge pay-off. Given the funds, we could quickly and effectively establish American Corners in Khorog, Kurgon-Tyube, Garm, Konibodom, Turson-Zoda, and a host of other Tajik cities where our American footprint would be welcome.

¶16. ACTION REQUEST: To support the Secretary's vision of transformational diplomacy, especially in a moderate Muslim country on Afghanistan's border, whose sovereignty is increasingly threatened by a resurgent Russian neo-colonial nationalism, we request funds to establish a minimum of six new American Corners.

HOAGLAND